

FILM WRITING
BY
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Mr. MacPhail began his film life as a critic, and then, by way of the cutting-room, graduated to script-writing. As a scenario editor Mr. MacPhail is the perfect listener, an executive who knows what he is talking about (and says it brilliantly), and, above all, a skilled diplomat. Occupying one of the most important positions in the British film-production industry, he has had much occasion for exercising this rare combination of qualities, plus his rich sense of humour, as you will observe.

A. B.

THERE is in existence a large number of excellent text-books on the writing of films. The authors tell you exactly how to handle plots, situations, continuity, characters and dialogue; they know so much about it, in fact, that you can't help wondering why they don't make their own fortunes by writing film stories themselves.

Curiously enough, most of these writers totally ignore the practical problems involved in film writing, an omission which it is my present purpose to remedy.

Original Screen Stories.—An original screen story is the work of a man who is too idealistic, too stupid or too lazy to realise that he could make more money—and, incidentally, secure a more faithful communication of his ideas—by writing his story as a novel or a play: afterwards selling the film rights at an immensely exaggerated figure.

APPENDICES

Theme.—If, nevertheless, you insist on writing an original screen story, your first requirement is a Really Good Theme, which may be defined as the writer's conception of the producing company's conception of the exhibitor's conception of the public's conception of entertainment.

Let's suppose, therefore, that you've been inspired with the following Really Good Theme.

A simple, unsullied, English rosebud is sent to an expensive boarding-school. Despite its superficial air of basket-ball and high thinking, this school is actually a nest of drink and debauchery. Though assailed on all sides by temptation, your heroine emerges unscathed, and the school is publicly exposed in its true colours.

Title.—You must immediately find a Good Box-Office Title for your story. A good title will often sell an indifferent story; a bad title will often ruin the chances of a good one.

The most important types of Box Office Titles are:

- (a) Sexual. If you have treated the theme in fearlessly daring fashion, you can call your story "Her Mistress" or "Dormitory."
- (b) Locational. If you have attempted a pretentious and inclusive account of life in a girls' school, you can call it "Girls in Gym Dress" or "Women of the Day After To-morrow."
- (c) Comical. If your treatment of the story is farcical, emphasising drink rather than debauchery, you can call it "A Port in Every Girl" or "The Sign of Lacrosse."

Starring Vehicle.—It's no use submitting your story to, say, Super-Art Films, Ltd., unless they can consider it

as a starring vehicle for some artiste who is under contract to them. Suppose, then, you hear that Super-Art Films are ransacking the world for a vehicle for Gloria Mae ; it is true that your story calls for a simple English rosebud, and that Miss Mae is an olive-skinned, passionate brunette with a strong Hungarian accent ; nevertheless, it will be a simple matter to rewrite your story to suit Miss Mae. Its theme, by an easy transition, will show how the advent of an immoral foreigner warps the ethics of five hundred clean-living English rosebuds.

Selling Originals.—According to the nature of your story, Super-Art Films will inform you :

- (a) Either that there is no longer a market for this specific type of subject because no successful picture of this same type has been produced within the last twelve months.
- (b) Or that there is no longer a market for this specific type of subject because too many successful pictures of this same type have been produced within the last twelve months.

But don't be disheartened ; it merely means that Super-Art Films want to persuade you to accept a reasonable price for your story.

Writing Scenarios.—Let's suppose you have given up in despair the idea of writing original screen stories, but have persuaded Super-Art Films to commission you to write a scenario for them. The odds are that your task will be the adaptation of a stage-play or a novel.

If it is a successful stage play, your simple task will be :

- (a) To reduce its length by 50 per cent.

- (b) To scatter the dialogue arbitrarily among a large number of settings so that an illusion of screen technique is observed.

If it is a popular novel, your object will be to incorporate all the best-known characters and situations in some kind of a narrative hotch-potch, so that you may not disappoint the admirers of the novel. (They form at least 1 per cent of your audience.)

If, however, you are dealing with an unsuccessful play or novel, you will probably be permitted to make a motion picture of it.

Production Cost.—The company has allocated x thousand pounds to the production of the picture ; you calculate that the story demands an allocation of twice this amount. Two alternative courses are open to you :

- (a) Either to reduce the number of sets, artistes and extras to a bare minimum ; in which case you will be accused of lacking all sense of showmanship and production value ;
- (b) Or to write a script including all the sets, artistes and extras which you think the story demands ; in which case you will be accused of lacking all practical sense of commercial picture making.

Story Conferences.—At frequent intervals during your writing of the script you will be summoned to attend story conferences, their main object being to justify the existence of a strange creature known as the " Scenario Editor."

Whether or not the conference is attended by the director, the star, the production manager, the supervisor, the scenario editor and the writer or writers

concerned, its result is invariably the same ; the script is hopeless and must be rewritten from start to finish on entirely different lines (according to the personal views of the director, or the star, or the production manager, or the supervisor, or the scenario editor. But not of the writer).

Directors.—All these people are more or less important to you, but it is the director on whom you must concentrate your attention.

You must make a close study of him and of his work, since the limitations of every film are strictly governed by the limitations of the man who directs it. If you write scenes which are outside the director's range he will direct them badly, and you will bear the blame ; if you write scenes which are beneath his capacity he will see to it that you are quickly relieved of your assignment.

Dialogue.—Whatever your abilities, the chances are that you will not be allowed to write the dialogue unless you are, or have been once, a playwright.

It is useless for you to point out that the dialogue of the average playwright is totally unsuited to the screen ; your sole remedy is to write a stage play and secure its production. One performance by a Sunday night play-producing society will suffice to accredit you as a writer of screen dialogue.

Handicaps.—Your script completed and approved by the innumerable persons concerned, it is now submitted to the British Board of Film Censors.

This Board is maintained by the film industry to protect it from any danger of police intervention, an object which it accomplishes with complete efficiency. If the Board takes exception to something you have written, you must question not its decision but rather the timidity of the industry itself.

Just as, so they say, there is one law for the poor and another for the rich, so there is one censorship for American and another for English pictures. You must not be discouraged if the Board prohibits scenes in your script which are strictly analogous to scenes which it has permitted in an American picture. It is the policy of the Board to maintain the standard of English film-production on an ethical level higher than that of the rest of the world.

You must, further, be prepared to discover that most themes of contemporaneous interest are vetoed by the Board because of their controversial, tendentious, subversive or detrimental nature.

If your story is of a topical or realistic description, and has yet obtained the approval of the Board, it will quite probably be ruled out by the endless ramifications of the English laws of libel.

If your story is intended to exploit any subject which would require the co-operation of the naval, military, air or civic authorities, you would be well advised to abandon it forthwith. These authorities are most friendly in their attitude, but they are bound by regulations which forbid their co-operation to any practicable extent in the production of fictional pictures.

If you resent the existence of these factors which make it impossible for English pictures to compete commercially with American pictures on an equal footing, perhaps you had better forego your patriotic ambitions and depart for Hollywood.

Alibis.—If the picture is a great success you will naturally claim all the credit for it. If, however, you get the impression that it is not going to be entirely successful, it is essential for you to begin broadcasting your alibis at the earliest possible moment.

The following is a list of the principal alibis currently employed by the best film writers :

- (a) "Pity old Blank didn't shoot the script as I wrote it."
- (b) (If he did) : "Pity old Blank made such a mess of my script. Now, if they'd given it to old So-and-so . . ."
- (c) "Why on earth they want to star a fellow like that—he's absolute death to a picture."
- (d) (If you wrote the original story but not the script) : "I'm very fond of old Thingumybob personally, but I must say he murdered that story of mine."
- (e) (If it was a rush job) : "Everybody knows one can't write a good script in less than six weeks. A fortnight—I ask you. . . ."
- (f) (If it was not a rush job) : "You should have seen the first version, old boy—before they started messing it about."

There is also a large number of subsidiary alibis available by which you can throw the blame on to the cameraman, the editor, the renters, the press or the public ; or, if the worst comes to the worst, you might even conceivably shoulder your own share of the blame yourself. . . .

Envoi.—If you think these foregoing remarks are intended to discourage you from entering the film business you're wrong. You *may* get a little credit ; you *might* get a lot of cash ; you *will* get plenty of fun, for film writing is the most fascinating occupation in the world.

NOTE

Mr. MacPhail wonders why the authors of text-books on scenario-writing don't make their own fortunes writing scripts. One good reason, as he suggests, is that these authors are incapable of writing *practical* scenarios ; another good reason, as I suggest, is that we do not pay "fortunes" to script-writers. Personally, I cannot help feeling that the present inequality in payment of the scenarist and the director will be ultimately remedied ; often the scenarist is only paid one-tenth the fee the director receives—unless, of course the director is a foreigner, in which case the disparity is greater. (Are you making me cynical, Mr. MacPhail ?) Perhaps the remedying of this complaint will come about when we produce more "originals" and fewer "adaptations."

A. B.